

# UNITED STATES–AFRICA LEADERS SUMMIT 2022: REINFORCING COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS

POLICY BRIEF NO. 3 | MARCH 2023

*Bob Wekesa, African Centre for the Study of the United States,  
University of the Witwatersrand*

## 1. Introduction

For Africa–United States (US) relations, 2022 was a defining year. August saw the launch of a new US Strategy Toward Africa<sup>1</sup> followed by ‘second’ US–Africa Leaders Summit in Washington DC in December. What are the implications for democracy, human rights and civil society? Going back to the ‘first’ US–Africa Leaders Summit of 2014 provides a starting point. As a Nigerian scholar observed, ‘there was virtually nothing about the 2014 inaugural summit’<sup>2</sup> during the 2022 Summit. No comprehensive or structured analysis of the commitments

from the 2014 Summit is publicly accessible. While contexts have changed, as argued by a West African scholar,<sup>3</sup> there are various continuities and shifts that a thorough review of both summits would help address. This suggests a gap on the part of African and US actors in tracking the implementation of democracy and human rights commitments between 2014<sup>4</sup> and 2022. It is a gap that the US is well placed to fill, but also one that civil society organisations can innovate projects and activities around.

- 1 The White House, 2022, *US strategy toward Africa*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/U.S.-Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-Africa-FINAL.pdf>
- 2 C. Onunaiju, 2022, ‘Reflections on the US–Africa Leaders Summit’, *Daily Trust*, 25 December, <https://dailytrust.com/reflections-on-the-u-s-africa-leaders-summit/>
- 3 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022, ‘The major takeaways from the US–Africa Leaders Summit’, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/21/major-takeaways-from-u.s.-africa-leaders-summit-pub-88691>
- 4 The White House, 2014, ‘Fact Sheet: US Support for democratic institutions, good governance, and human rights in Africa’, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/04/fact-sheet-us-support-democratic-institutions-good-governance-and-human->

## 2. Review of US–Africa Leaders Summit 2014

### 2.1 Elections

One of the resolutions of the 2014 Summit was US support for free and fair elections to enhance credibility, transparency and inclusivity. To the contrary, elections-related democratic backsliding has been on the rise. A key strategy employed by African leaders is extensions or removal of constitutional term limits on their tenures. A recent report shows that, after the 2014 Summit, eight African presidents manipulated constitutional provisions to elongate their stay in power.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 illustrates the trend.

It is evident that initial commitments by African presidents to electoral integrity have fallen short of the promise. Yet, the African Union (AU) and the US have

shied away from robust ameliorative action to confront the problem. This has dire consequences. For instance, a 2021 forecast by the AU’s African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) concluded that ‘current threats to democracy and free and fair elections in particular ... [have] critical impact factors with potential to steer the continent more towards worse than best case outcomes’.<sup>6</sup>

The US government should reconsider invitations of such leaders to summits as it is construed as an endorsement of unconstitutional machinations. The AU can consider putting term extensions on future AU meetings. Civil society organisations should be supported to robustly campaign against this practice.

**Table 1:** Changes to constitutional term limits since 2014–2022 (compiled from various sources)

Country	Year of term limit extension	Incumbent at the time of term extension	Current age or age at the time of leaving office or death	Years in power
South Sudan	2015, 2018	Salva Kiir	71	18
Republic of Congo	2015	Sassou Nguesso	79	26
Rwanda	2015	Paul Kagame	66	23
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	2016	Joseph Kabila	45	18
Burundi	2018	Pierre Nkurunziza	56 (died 2020)	15
Chad	2018	Idriss Déby	69 (died 2021)	31
Uganda	2018	Yoweri Museveni	78	37
Egypt	2019	Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	68	9
Côte d’Ivoire	2020	Alassane Ouattara	81	12
Guinea	2020	Alpha Conde	83 (military ouster)	11

5 L. Mohlamenyane, 2021, ‘Presidential term limits in Africa: what should be done?’, OSISA, 9 February, <https://osisa.org/termlimits-in-africa/>

6 African Peer Review Mechanism, 2021, *The Africa Governance Report 2021*, <https://www.aprm-au.org/publications/the-africa-governance-report-2021/>

**Table 2:** Presidential term elongation in Africa (source: African Center for Strategic Studies,<sup>7</sup> 2023)

No constitutional two-term limit	Countries with two-term limit in Constitution			
	Limit not yet met by any President (year limit to be reached)	Two-term limit reached		
		Attempted modification or elimination of limit		Left office (first leader to adhere to limit)
Limit modified or eliminated	Limit retained			
<b>Eritrea</b>	Sudan (2022)	Guinea (Conté, 2001) (Condé, 2020)	Zambia (Chiluba, 2001)	Tanzania (Mwinyi, 1995)
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Mali (2024)	Togo (Eyadéma, 2002, 2019)	Malawi (Muluzi, 2003)	Ghana (Rawlings, 2001)
<b>Gambia</b>	Burkina Faso (2024)	Gabon (Bongo, 2003)	Nigeria (Obasanjo, 2006)	São Tomé and Príncipe (Trovoada, 2001)
<b>Lesotho</b>	Central African Republic (2025)	Uganda (Museveni, 2005, 2017)	Senegal (Wade, 2012)	Cabo Verde (Monteiro, 2001)
<b>Libya</b>	Angola (2027)	Chad (Deby, 2005, 2018)	Benin (Talon, 2017)	Mauritius (Uteem, 2002)
<b>Morocco</b>	Madagascar (2028)	Cameroon (Biya, 2008)		Kenya (Moi, 2002)
<b>Somalia</b>	Zimbabwe (2028)	Algeria (Bouteflika, 2008, 2016)		Mozambique (Chissano, 2005)
<b>Eswatini</b>	Guinea-Bissau (2029)	Djibouti (Guelleh, 2010)		Sierra Leone (Kabbah, 2007)
	Tunisia(2029)	Burundi (Nkurunziza, 2015,2018)		Botswana (Mogae, 200S)
	Equatorial Guinea (2030)	Rwanda (Kagame, 2015)		South Africa Mbeki, 2008)
	Seychelles (2030)	Republic of the Congo (Nguesso, 2015)		Namibia (Pohamba, 2015)
		South Sudan (Kiir, 2015, 2018)		Liberia (Sirleaf, 2018)
		DRC (Kabila, 2016)		Mauritania (Abdel Aziz, 2019)
		Comoros (Azali, 2018)		Niger (Issoufou, 2021)
		Egypt (Sisi, 2019)		
		Côte d'Ivoire (Ouattara, 2020)		

<sup>7</sup> J. Siegle and C. Cook, 2023, 'Circumvention of term limits weakens governance in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 14 September, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/circumvention-of-term-limits-weakens-governance-in-africa/>

## 2.2 Civil society, democracy and governance review

The 2014 Summit optimistically launched the ‘Stand with Civil Society’ and ‘Making All Voices Count’ initiatives as cornerstones of democracy. However, a Freedom House report<sup>8</sup> published in 2023 tracking performance over the last 10 years shows that 11 African countries out of 33 globally have witnessed the greatest democratic declines. This period roughly coincides with the period between 2014 and 2023. Five African countries – South Sudan, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, the Central African Republic and Somalia – are in the category of the 16 worst performers globally in terms of political and civil liberties. Accordingly, if the 2014 Summit was meant to contribute to boost democratic renewal on the continent, then it did not fully achieve intended objectives.

The 2014 Summit touted the Open Governance Partnership programme as an ingredient for enhanced transparency and accountability by governments. Yet, the 2022 Transparency International Corruption Perception

Index (see Table 3) ranks 13 African countries in the bottom 20 category of the 180 surveyed countries.

A keen look at the data on elections, political liberties and transparency reveals that a country that performs poorly on election metrics is likely to also perform poorly on political liberties and transparency. The US government should consider using tools and instruments at its disposal to pressure such government to reform on one criterion. This could have a ripple effect on the other areas. The AU should consider a more effective use of its organs and agencies such as the APRM and the African Union Development Agency–New Partnership for African Development (AUDA-NEPAD) and the African Union Election Observation Missions (AUEOM) to discourage and penalise anti-democratic behaviour. The AU could borrow a leaf from the sanctions it metes out on coup plotters. Civil society organisations should consider the US-Africa Leaders summit(s) as an opportunity to investigate democracy commitments and structure advocacy around them.

**Table 3:** Out of 20 worst performing countries on corruption, 13 are in Africa (source: Transparency International)

Score	Country	Rank
12	Somalia	180
13	South Sudan	178
17	Libya	171
17	Equatorial Guinea	171
17	Burundi	171
19	Comoros	167
19	Chad	167
20	DRC	166
21	Guinea Bissau	164
21	Republic of Congo	164
22	Sudan	162
22	Eritrea	162
23	Zimbabwe	157

8 Freedom House, 2023, *Freedom in the world*, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW\\_2023\\_50Years\\_DigitalPDF.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_2023_50Years_DigitalPDF.pdf)

## 3. 2022 Summit perspectives

### 3.1 Political transitions as the key plan

The key democracy, human rights and civil society component of the 2022 Summit is a new initiative dubbed 'African Democratic and Political Transitions (ADAPT)'.<sup>9</sup> Its core is elections with a pledge of USD 75 million by the US government. Notably, there were no monetary commitments from the African side on this initiative. Consequently, there was little input from African leaders in the launch of the ADAPT initiative. These factors suggest low levels of African agency, which augurs badly for African ownership of a supposedly joint initiative. In fact, the launch of the plan doubled up as the commencement of its implementation. President Biden met with six African leaders whose countries were going to the polls in 2023, urging for free and fair elections. These are Felix Tshisekedi, DRC; Ali Bongo, Gabon; George Weah, Liberia; Andry Rajoelina, Madagascar; Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria; and Julius Bio, Sierra Leone. Although not participating in this particular meeting, the attendance of the Summit by Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang, even after the State Department's serious reservations about the credibility of his election the previous month,<sup>10</sup> signals tolerance to electoral fraud. Further failure is already evident in the Tunisian parliamentary elections in late December 2022 and Nigerian presidential and legislative elections held in February 2023, where observers returned verdicts of 'not free and fair'.<sup>11</sup>

As a researcher from Senegal observed, in most of the six countries, the problem with electoral controversies is not one of financial resources – which the US was pledging – but poor electoral processes and lack of the rule of law.<sup>12</sup> Going by the Equatorial Guinean, Tunisian and Nigerian elections, the US and the AU will need to step up efforts to ensure resources are better aligned with objectives, beginning with the five nations scheduled for elections in 2023. As we see in the peace and security policy brief of this series, botched elections often trigger

instability, including coups. The AU should consider mobilising and investing its own resources to ensure it contributes to the commitments made by the US, and civil society organisations should consider using the elections thus far held as a launch pad into proposing innovative ways in which the initiative can be enhanced.

During the Summit, President Biden asserted the centrality of democracy, respect for the law, commitment to human rights and responsible government as the guiding principles and tools of the new partnership.<sup>13</sup> Secretary of State Antony Blinken and nearly all the other US officials read from the same democracy promotion script throughout the Summit. On the African side, similar sentiments were forthcoming from only a minority of the leaders, including Zambia's Hichilema Hakainde and Niger's Mohamed Bazoum. In an opinion article, Bazoum embraced democracy thus: 'In the current context of Africa, where democratic values are challenged, and military coups persist ... we are determined to be a model for the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and good governance'.<sup>14</sup> Notably, Niger was a beneficiary of an infrastructure deal worth USD 504 million for infrastructure development linking the landlocked country to Porto-Novo on the Beninese Atlantic coast. The implication is that Niger is benefitting from US bundling of democratic progress with economic support.

African leaders seem not to have been enthusiastic about the ADAPT initiative. A comment by Abraham Kuol Nyuon, a professor at the University of Juba, South Sudan, captures the attitude of African leaders: 'The United States is still seen as a superpower from the African perspective, but most African leaders do not want to align with its promotion of democracy ... they need the support of America but not the system of America'.<sup>15</sup> This difference in values and norms suggests an approach in which the US should forge closer ties with civil society organisations rather than expending all energy on persuading politicians resistant to democratic principles. The technical arms of the AU – including the Department

9 The White House, 2022, 'US–Africa Leaders Summit: Strengthening partnerships to meet shared priorities', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/15/u-s-africa-leaders-summit-strengthening-partnerships-to-meet-shared-priorities/>

10 US State Department, 2022, 'On the elections in Equatorial Guinea', <https://www.state.gov/on-the-elections-in-equatorial-guinea/>

11 National Democratic Institute, 2023, 'NDI/IRI Election Observation Mission to Nigeria's 2023 Presidential and Legislative elections presents preliminary statement and recommendations', <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-iri-election-observation-mission-nigeria-s-2023-presidential-legislative-elections>; B. Ghosh, 2022, Biden should call Tunisian Dictator Kais Saied's bluff', *Bloomberg*, 20 December, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-12-20/biden-should-call-tunisian-dictator-kais-saied-s-bluff#xj4y7vzkg>

12 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022, 'The major takeaways from the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit', <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/21/major-takeaways-from-u.s.-africa-leaders-summit-pub-88691>

13 The White House, 2022, 'Remarks by President Biden at the US–Africa Summit Leaders Session on Partnering on the African Union's Agenda 2063', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/12/15/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-u-s-africa-summit-leaders-session-on-partnering-on-the-african-unions-agenda-2063>

14 M. Bazoum, 2020, 'US–Africa Leaders Summit presents opportunity for partnership between US and Niger', *Newsweek*, 12 December, <https://www.newsweek.com/usafrica-leaders-summit-presents-opportunity-partnership-between-us-niger-opinion-1765434>

15 A. Madhani, F. Mutsaka and M. Magome, 2022, 'Biden aims to narrow trust gap between US and African leaders at summit', *PBS News Hour*, 11 December, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/biden-aims-to-narrow-trust-gap-between-u-s-and-african-leaders-at-summit>

of Political Affairs, the APRM, AUDA-NEPAD, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR), the AU Commission on International Law (AUCIL) and the observer mission – should reach out to the US ahead of forthcoming elections to strategise on how to work together under the ADAPT initiative.

### 3.2 US democratic deficits

While the US places democracy promotion at the core of its foreign policy towards Africa, it has experienced democratic reversals of its own since the 2014 Summit.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the 2023 Freedom House report includes the US in the list of countries with dramatic democratic declines over the last decade. The erosion of US democracy has been catalysed by deeply entrenched right-wing populism, nationalism and isolationism fuelled by former President Donald Trump's 'America First' mantra. Retreating from democracy promotion in Africa during the Trump administration (2016–2020), the US all but terminated engagement on matters of democracy in Africa. Intense and relentless antagonism between the Democrats and Republicans might make it difficult for the Biden administration to get budgetary approval for the pledges made during the Summit.

President Biden himself acknowledged the challenges that democracy faces in the US under the weight of racial injustices, a spike in misinformation and disinformation, a polarised political environment, rising levels of inequalities, and mounting legal and constitutional challenges.<sup>17</sup> In an interview with the Voice of America, Republic of Congo's President Sassou Nguesso remarked that 'Even here, in the US, we were surprised to see what happened at the Capitol', in reference to the 6 January

2021 insurrection. Anti-democratic African leaders have been emboldened by the political problems the US faces to double down on their illiberal practices – a point argued by many African democracy-inclined analysts, including Professor Emeritus John Stremlau at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Democratic deficits in the US have resulted in intolerance against minority groups such as the LGBTQ+ groups and legislation against the right to abortion. Similar extremist views are rampant in Africa, energised by Islamic and Christian fundamentalism and African traditional spiritual ideologies. During a side event of the December Summit organised by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, human rights advocates from the DRC, Cameroon, Nigeria and Uganda lobbied the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and the US State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom to include these countries on the watch list of abusers of women-related religious freedoms.<sup>19</sup>

Since the US democratic credentials have been drastically eroded, the way forward is for its leaders to close ranks with African counterparts. A good platform for jointly tackling democratic backsliding is the Biden administration's Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal (PIDR), otherwise known simply as the 'Democracy Summit', which was launched in 2021. The hosting of this year's summit in Zambia<sup>20</sup> provides an opportunity to nail down some of the common problems. Already, several civil society organisations are involved in the initiative. The hosting of the Summit on African soil offers an opportunity for scaling up the participation of many more organisations, particularly from the southern, eastern and central African regions.

16 S. Repucci and A. Slipowitz, 2021, 'Democracy under siege', Freedom House, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/FIW2021\\_Abridged\\_03112021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/FIW2021_Abridged_03112021_FINAL.pdf)

17 The White House, 2022, 'Remarks by President Biden on the continued battle for the soul of the nation', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/01/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-continued-battle-for-the-soul-of-the-nation/>

18 J. Stremlau, 2020, 'Having a "lawless" president in charge as America heads for elections is no laughing matter', *Daily Maverick*, 21 August, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-21-having-a-lawless-president-in-charge-as-america-heads-for-elections-is-no-laughing-matter/>

19 S. Kamman, 2022, 'Advocates raise human rights concerns as US hosts African leaders', *Christian Post*, 15 December, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/advocates-raise-human-rights-concerns-as-us-hosts-african-leaders.html>

20 The White House, 2022, 'Joint Statement between Costa Rica, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of Zambia, and the United States on the announcement of the Second Summit for Democracy', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/29/joint-statement-between-costa-rica-the-netherlands-the-republic-of-korea-the-republic-of-zambia-and-the-united-states-on-the-announcement-of-the-second-summit-for-democracy/>

**Table 4:** Monetary commitments during the US–Africa Leaders Summit 2022 (source: US State Department)

Initiative	Amount in USD	Description
Supporting African Resilience and Recovery	21 bn	Lending fund via the International Monetary Fund for low and middle-income countries
Investing in the Health Workforce to Build More Resilient Health Systems	4 bn	Part of the Global Health Worker Initiative, for the period 2022–2025
Strengthening Food Security Partnerships and Responding to the Need for Emergency Food Security Assistance	2 bn	Emergency humanitarian assistance
The First Regional Multi-Sectoral Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compacts	504 mn	Targeted at infrastructure projects in Benin and Niger
US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC)	369 mn	For food security, renewable energy infrastructure and health projects
The Initiative on Digital Transformation with Africa (DTA)	350 mn	Expansion of digital access and literacy across the continent
Partnering to Build Stronger Health Systems and Strengthen Global Health Security	215 mn	COVID-19 pandemic specific commitment
Support for Climate Adaptation and Resilience	150 mn	President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE)
Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI)	100 mn	Expansion of YALI to include businesses and diaspora
21st Century Partnership for African Security (21PAS)	100 mn	For peace and security programmes
African Democratic and Political Transitions (ADAPT)	75 mn	To counter democratic backsliding and support political transitions

### 3.3 Imbalance between democracy and other commitments

Democracy, human rights and civil society is the least elaborate component of the main outcome document. This is evident when comparison is made between financial pledges and commitments towards democracy and governance vis-à-vis other area of engagement. The USD 75 million dedicated to the ADAPT initiative is the least of all the monetary commitments as Table 4 shows.

The upshot is that the US is back peddling on democracy and good governance promotion as it emphasises mutual partnerships inclined towards trade and investments and attempts to win over Africa. Indeed, researchers from Brookings Institution argued that the muted focus on good governance 'reflected the range of leaders invited to the Summit'.<sup>21</sup> The inference is that the Biden administration could not raise core governance issues directly given that the majority represent countries with bad democratic reputations.

### 3.4 Weaknesses in civil society

Analysis of civil society dimensions further buttresses the conclusion that democracy and governance are on the margins of the new engagements. For instance, while the Civil Society Forum on the first day of the Summit was attended by over 200 participants,<sup>22</sup> there is no single, standalone or explicit civil society action plan even though civil society features across the board. The Civil Society Partnership for Civilian Security initiative closely resembled a robust civil society dimension, whereby the US State Department pledged a USD 2 million fund to create civil society consortiums to facilitate peace and security-related work.<sup>23</sup> But this is folded into the peace and security pillar rather than an explicit civil society one. Furthermore, the civil society dimensions infused into the other pillars are not explicitly directed towards core democracy and human rights promotion but towards what may be considered softer civil society issues. These include the establishment of the Presidential Advisory

Council for Diaspora Engagement (PAC-ADE) and several people-to-people elements of civil society.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the focus on emerging leaders saw to a three-year pledge of USD 1.1 billion for the 700,000-plus Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) Network.<sup>25</sup> Women inclusion and gender-based violence constitute one of the more robust areas of engagement in the democracy and governance domain. In one initiative, the US committed USD 1 million to the African Women's Entrepreneurship Program (AWEP). It is however set out as a transactional business strategy rather than a civil society plan. In another programme, the Transform Digital Spaces, USD 1.3 million was committed to addressing gender-based online harassment and abuse. This plan fails to connect with digital activism, a growing area in the African civil society space as does the broader Digital Transformation with Africa (DTA)<sup>26</sup> initiative.

Overall, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that civil society was sacrificed on the altar of placating African leaders. For instance, in one of the press briefings during the Summit, journalists repeatedly raised concerns about the low levels of engagement in the media space, their disquiet bolstered by the fact there were virtually no dedicated press freedom commitments. As Human Rights Watch analysts noted, 'Notwithstanding claims that human rights are at the centerpiece of its foreign policy, the Biden administration continues to provide military and financial assistance to rights-abusing regimes across the continent'.<sup>27</sup> In another critique, a Kenyan scholar identified the problem of the US government favouring US-based contractors for democracy work in Africa rather than working with local civil society organisations. It can be concluded that the pared down investment in democracy and governance is not sufficient to stem the tide of large-scale democratic backsliding that costs millions of lives and livelihoods. The onus is on civil society organisations to lobby the AU and the US for inclusion on the core agenda between now and the next summit.

21 U.A. Ordu and D. Resnick, 2022, 'After the US-Africa Leaders Summit, the US must ensure accountability and strengthen coordination', Brookings Institution, 23 December, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/12/23/after-the-summit-the-us-must-ensure-accountability-and-strengthen-coordination/>

22 The White House, 2022, 'Fact Sheet: US-Africa partnership in promoting peace, security, and democratic governance', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/15/fact-sheet-u-s-africa-partnership-in-promoting-peace-security-and-democratic-governance/>

23 The White House, 2022, 'Fact Sheet: US-Africa Partnership in promoting peace, security, and democratic governance', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/15/fact-sheet-u-s-africa-partnership-in-promoting-peace-security-and-democratic-governance/>

24 The White House, 2022, 'Fact Sheet: US-Africa partnership in elevating diaspora engagement', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/13/fact-sheet-u-s-africa-partnership-in-elevating-diaspora-engagement/>

25 The US State Department, 2022, 'Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a press availability', <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-26/>

26 The White House, 2022, 'Fact Sheet: New initiative on Digital Transformation with Africa (DTA)', <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/14/fact-sheet-new-initiative-on-digital-transformation-with-africa-dta/>

27 N. Widdersheim and K.C. Nantulya, 2022, 'For Biden's Africa strategy to succeed, prioritize human rights', Human Rights Watch, 16 November, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/16/bidens-africa-strategy-succeed-prioritize-human-rights>



### 3.5 US sanctions towards Africa

US policy towards Africa upholds the use of carrots and sticks to rein in illiberal regimes, including sanctions. Sanctions is an overarching term for foreign policy tools used by the US to change the behaviour of African abusers of democracy and human rights.<sup>28</sup> US sanctions towards Africa include trade embargoes, restrictions on exports or imports, cessation of foreign assistance and investments, freezing assets, banning trade transactions and blocking international travel, among others. The US runs an elaborate sanctions regime through the Office of Sanctions Coordination in the US State Department, and the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in the Treasury Department. As of March 2023, influential politicians and businesspeople from nine African countries are under sanctions, namely the Central African Republic, the DRC, Ethiopia, Libya, Mali, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe.

While sanctions seemed to succeed in the past, they are increasingly failing to achieve the desired results for various reasons.<sup>29</sup> Because of the rise of global powers such as China and Russia, sanctioned individuals and countries have found alternatives and evaded consequences. At the AU level, African leaders have often closed against US sanctions on member states, claiming such actions are unilateral. Even though sanctions are targeted at elites, the economic impacts of the sanctions have been felt the most by common people. The economic impacts have also resulted in massive migration from the sanctioned countries, triggering humanitarian crises internally and externally. Moreover, African leaders with poor democracy and human rights records have not been sanctioned, often because of their strategic importance to US interests in the security and economic domains. Third-party sanctions also have a ripple effect in Africa. Jidefor Adibe, a professor at Nasarawa State University in Nigeria, has cited several cases to show that sanctions imposed on Russia had affected several African countries, particularly in terms of food, fertiliser and oil supply chains. This sentiment was shared by a Belgian-Ghanaian analyst in the *Modern Ghana* publication.<sup>30</sup>

Sanctions remain an important strategy for returning anti-democratic countries to democratic paths. For them to succeed, the US needs to agree and coordinate with regional organisations, the AU and the UN, particularly for wide-ranging, country-level sanctions.

**“US policy towards Africa upholds the use of carrots and sticks to rein in illiberal regimes, including sanctions.”**

28 E. Kessler, 2022, *How economic sanctions are used in US foreign policy*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

29 The US Senate, 2016, 'US sanctions policy in sub-Saharan Africa', <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg28431/html/CHRG-114shrg28431.htm>

30 J.N. Williams, 2023, 'US–Africa Summit 2022: What did the US learn and what does Africa need to do', *Modern Ghana*, 23 December, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1202822/us-africa-summit-2022-what-did-the-us-learn.html>

### 3.6 The good and the bad

Questions remain about US engagement with democratic and undemocratic leaders. During the Summit, it was palpable that the leaders of countries deemed democratic were given prominence. The leaders of Cabo Verde, from Zambia and The Gambia were for instance invited to the civil society forum while those considered illiberal were conveniently left out. The Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema seems to have benefited from his government's repeal of laws such as the defamation of the president. Hichilema signed several deals and reached an agreement with both Vice President Kamala Harris and US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen for restructuring a debilitating external debt. Yellen followed through with a pledge to visit Zambia in January 2023.<sup>31</sup> In a public forum at the respected Council on Foreign Relations on the side lines of the Summit, Hichilema explained that 'our first step [after winning elections in 2021] ... was to stabilize the country, restore the rule of law, law and order, very important; then, [focus on the economy]'.<sup>32</sup> A former ambassador of Zambia, Mark Storella, concluded that Zambia had emerged as a role model for US-Africa relations in a co-authored article linking democratic dividends and health.<sup>33</sup>

On the other side of the divide are countries considered undemocratic who are bound to push back against US democracy-promotion initiatives. For instance, during a media interview, Republic of Congo President Sassou Nguesso argued that 'democracy and good governance are a process',<sup>34</sup> implying that African democracy needs time to mature. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, whose country has instituted anti-LGBTQ+ practices is reported to have had an uneasy side meeting with State Department officials over the matter. According to the source, 'the Ugandan president pushed back and described LGBTQ+ persons as awful and pivoted that religious leaders in his country are fully against them'.<sup>35</sup> Rwandan President Paul Kagame was on an equally counteractive mission against accusations of gross violations of human rights. The deduction is that wider democracy and governance issues may fall through the cracks as implementation of the action plan and vision gets underway.

**“During the Summit, it was palpable that the leaders of countries deemed democratic were given prominence.”**

31 M. Gavin, 2023, 'High stakes and encouraging progress in Zambia should prompt international support', Council on Foreign Relations, 4 January, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/zambias-bet-democracy>

32 Council on Foreign Relations, 2022, 'A conversation with President Hichilema of Zambia', 12 December, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-president-hichilema-zambia>

33 C. Holmes and C.M. Storella, 2022, 'US-Africa Leaders Summit: Zambia's lessons on governance, health, and partnership', Think Global Health, 12 December, <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/us-africa-leaders-summit-zambias-lessons-governance-health-and-partnership>

34 M. Mariama Diallo, 2022, 'Republic of Congo President hopeful after US-Africa Leaders Summit', VOA News, 21 December, <https://www.voanews.com/a/republic-of-congo-president-hopeful-after-us-africa-leaders-summit/6886406.html>

35 K.G. Gaynor, 2022, 'Exclusive: Biden administration pressed Uganda president on anti-LGBTQ record', *The Grio*, 19 December, <https://thegrio.com/2022/12/19/exclusive-biden-administration-pressed-uganda-president-on-anti-lgbtq-record/>

## 4. Recommendations

Although attempts were made to connect the US Strategy Toward Africa and the African Union's Agenda 2063, the democracy and governance action plans still came across as more American than African. To address this, inclusive coordinating teams should be set up at national, subregional and continental levels to analyse the action plans and come up with negotiation and implementation plans. The key question would be: How are the Summit's plans linked or delinked from Agenda 2063 programmes? These plans should receive the endorsement at all three levels. An immediate opportunity for teasing out possibilities is the Summit for Democracy event scheduled for Zambia in March 2023. US officials should indeed encourage particularly civil society organisations to interrogate the democracy and human rights dimensions of the Summit's outcomes. An institutional framework for achieving these goals should be generated by both partners complete with clear organisational and review mechanisms, goals and objectives, resources and timelines.

It is one thing to articulate many intentions, but the measure of success lies in tangible implementation with clear, evidence-informed achievements and milestones. For the AU, success will be measured in terms of the return to democracy of countries performing poorly on good governance and human rights. For the US, success would be measured in terms of statistics that pair US monetary investment in democracy and governance and tangible instances of democratic renewal and dividends across the continent.

To address the issue of imbalances between the democracy, human rights and civil society aspects of the Summit's action plans versus economic and geopolitical agendas, a framework developed jointly would greatly assist. For the US, this asymmetry can be addressed in the interim by producing and providing democracy, human rights and governance guidelines for each of the transactional or pragmatic areas of engagement. For the AU, African regional organisations and individual African countries, an opportunity arises to match the monetary pledges. Indeed, the AU now has an opportunity to update the initial democratic and human rights aspirations of Agenda 2063 and the subsequent 10-year plan. In future, an attempt should be made to place democracy, human rights and civil society dimensions of the partnership in one section of the action plan and to see them as deserving independent treatment. Distinctions should also be made between core democracy, human rights and civil society promulgations and the softer, relational, citizen diplomacy aspects. The same would apply to the need to

cover democracy and human rights in a comprehensive and coherent manner rather than favouring one aspect – in this case political transitions – over others.


The US is itself grappling with unprecedented democratic deficits. This suggests a truly two-way learning process with African counterparts. To this end, US officials would have to be humbler and more persuasive in their democracy-promotion approaches. On the African end, the AU and regional organisations should consider promoting some of the success stories on the continent as role models using entities such as the APRM and AUDA-NEPAD.

The existing AU norms – such as the ACHPR, the APRM, the African Convention and Preventing and Combating Corruption (AUCPCC) and the African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance (ACDEG), which many AU member states have ratified and acceded to – should be supported, as should their implementation and compliance, instead of reinventing the wheel and establishing new approaches and a separate set of aspirations.

**It is one thing to articulate many intentions, but the measure of success lies in tangible implementation with clear, evidence-informed achievements and milestones.**


**Published by the Open Society Foundations Africa Regional Office**


Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa  
1 Hood Avenue / 148 Jan Smuts Avenue, Rosebank  
Johannesburg, 2196, South Africa

 +27-(0)11-587-5000

 [www.osf.org.za](http://www.osf.org.za)

 @OpenSociety

 Open Society Foundations

 Open Society Foundations

**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**